

Feeling stressed

Stress is the normal reaction to any demands made on us. It is a part of life and it is usually a positive thing, providing that we learn to control it and use it to our advantage. We need stress motivate us and give us excitement. However, stress can be a negative force if it is present in excessive or too small amounts. We all have our own individual requirements for stress, as well as our own limits of adjusting to stress. Prolonged stress can lead to becoming physically ill or psychologically unwell.

The three basic steps regarding stress management are to:

- **Recognise that you feel stressed**
- **Identify the cause**
- **Find ways to relieve the stress**

How Do You Know You Are Excessively Stressed?

What you need to be aware of is any **change** in how you normally operate mentally and physically. Excess stress/pressure will show itself in individual ways depending on our individual vulnerabilities and experiences. Despite this there are many symptoms which people have in common. These include any of the following:

- Tension in muscles (eg. neck, back)
- Frequent nervous tics, muscle spasms or twitching eyelids
- Rapid shallow breathing , rapid or pounding heartbeat
- Difficulty sitting still or relaxing. Physical agitation
- Difficulties with sleep (problems falling asleep, or erratic sleep)
- Lack of energy/exhaustion
- Reduced motivation
- Decreased concentration and memory
- Uneven mood, increases in anxiety, irritability, anger or tearfulness
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Poor performance
- Social withdrawal and/or strained relationships (which can also be a cause)
- Health problems (eg stomach problems, stress headaches, migraines, thrush)
- Behavioural excesses (eg. drinking, eating, smoking too much).

Stress affects our physiological functioning, our behaviour, our thoughts and our emotions. You can learn to identify your own individual early warning signs (eg. headaches, sleeping problems, irritability). Once you have identified you are stressed, the best way to manage this is to either treat the cause or, if that is not practically possible, attempt to minimise both the physical and psychological effects of the stress in a number of ways.

Common Causes of Stress

Academic Stressors:

Poor Work Organisation When you have not organised your workload or managed your time well you may end up feeling out of control and pressured when demands increase.

Doing Too Much If time management techniques do not significantly lower your stress levels then you may wish to consider whether you are doing too many courses, courses with heavy workloads, or taking on too much outside of study.

Relationship Conflict:

Sometimes conflict in relationships (with flatmates, friends, partners, family) causes stress and conversely stress can result in relationship conflict. Relationships are often stressed near exams.

Major Life Changes:

Major changes such in living arrangements, relationships, work, health, loss of a loved one etc add to one's stress level. Where possible try to avoid changes like moving flat during exams or high stress times. If major changes are unavoidable, try to plan them around times when there is little else going on. If forced change occurs in your life that is out of the blue seek support from your friends, family, your department or Student Health Centre.

Trauma:

Traumatic events (eg major accident, being in a terrible situation such as war, or being physically, psychologically or sexually abused) whether current or past can have a major and sometimes overwhelming effect on your physical, emotional and spiritual state.

Irrational/Unreasonable Beliefs (Internal stress)

Something is only stressful if we perceive it to be so. Our beliefs and perceptions have a powerful influence over how we feel. Changing our perceptions of an event, through looking at it in a different way, can be a powerful way to manage stress.

These are some common irrational or unreasonable beliefs that can easily increase one's stress levels:

Perfectionistic Expectations: "I should be studying every minute" or "I should be getting A's in everything or I'm a failure" are counterproductive and unrealistic. If you work every minute you will eventually collapse from exhaustion. Similarly if you do not get A's in everything, does not mean you have failed.

Focusing on the Negative: Only noticing the negative or painful consequences of events (ie "short term pain") at the expense of noticing the positive, usually delayed, consequences (ie "long term gain"), can exaggerate stress. What you think about will dictate how you feel.

False Attributions: Blaming yourself for everything negative that happens ("taking things to heart") is a sure recipe for maintaining high levels of stress. This can be made worse by attributing successes to external causes (eg. "I passed the exam out of luck") and not giving yourself credit when it is due.

Unhealthy/ Unbalanced Lifestyle

Stress can result in imbalances in lifestyle and imbalances can lead to stress, for instance: overeating, drinking too much alcohol or caffeine or smoking too much. Getting too little exercise and/or sleep and not eating can also place considerable strain on your physical and psychological resources

Psychological Problems and Physical Illness

Most psychological problems and physical illness are stressful. Sometimes psychological problems (eg. depressive and anxiety disorders) and physical illnesses can take on a life of their own and do not respond to your best efforts to rid yourself of them. Consulting a doctor or counsellor at the Student Health Centre can help.

Combating Stress

Reduce academic pressure on yourself:

Useful behavioural techniques to organise yourself may be:

- Timetabling (contact hours, study times and recreation times);
- Prioritising tasks;
- Setting short term, medium term and long term goal and deciding on suitable rewards for achieving these goals;
- Planning in advance for busy times.

If you find that you're doing too much some options may be to:

- Drop one or more papers. Also consider cutting down on less important extra curricula activities. Try not to take on too much outside activity but it is important not to cut out the things you really enjoy and the activities that help you relax and stay sane;
- Keep all courses, but drop expectations to a more realistic level. Look at what papers are most important to you and allocate effort accordingly;
- Keep all courses and retain high expectations but improve on study techniques. In making this choice you need to take into account that high stress will continue. Keep a check on your health and make sure you take regular breaks from study to do relaxing and enjoyable things in order to reduce the likelihood of mental and physical exhaustion;
- If things are really bad allow yourself to at least consider the option of taking a break from university. Remember this is always an option and it's better to do this than to break down - your health is worth more than a degree.

Dealing with relationship stress: Where possible, **avoid making any major decisions** during times of high stress. Try to make an agreement with your partner that you will discuss things in full as soon as possible after this period. It may be necessary to agree on some guidelines for your relationship in the meantime. Remember that it is a difficult period for everyone and it is important to give some latitude.

Establish priorities: Work out what is most important to you at the moment. Try to organise your time around these priorities. (eg study, time with friends, partner or children). Set goals and reward yourself for achieving them.

Develop healthy ways of thinking: Practice focusing on the positive things that will come out of the stressful situation. Identify the things you do well, the characteristics you like about yourself and acknowledge these positively. Don't blame yourself for everything. Most negative events are caused by a number of factors, not just you. **Reduce expectations of yourself and of others.** You are not a superperson. Use your energy to do the most pressing and achievable tasks. Set realistic goals and if you can't reach these, consider that your expectations of yourself may still be too high at this particular time.

Predict high stress periods (eg major projects, more than one essay being due in at the same time, exams, moving house, getting married) and work towards being organised prior to these times so as to prevent being overstressed. **Performance is best when stress levels are high but not excessive.** Don't wait until the last minute.

Lead a balanced lifestyle: Consider diet, exercise, work, time with friends, leisure etc. Schedule time out and make sure you take breaks. Get right away occasionally - tramping, skiing, bush walking or whatever you enjoy. It will be easier to do well in your courses if you are happy, healthy and you take regular breaks from study. Don't forget that you have a life beyond your work! **Remember, whatever it is that you find relaxing or pleasurable, include it in your schedule.**

Share problems with flatmates, classmates struggling with the same course workload, friends, family, lecturers and tutors. Don't be afraid to ask for help if things are getting on top of you. **Seek professional help if you recognise that you need it.** There is nothing wrong with seeing a doctor or counsellor if you are stressed. Sometimes just talking to someone about your problems can begin to make a difference and you can see what you need to do to improve things for yourself. Often it helps just to get things off your chest.

Learn to say no to things you do not want to do or don't have time to do. You may find you feel guilty at first but you are not indispensable and others will get over it.

Relax You know yourself what helps you relax the most...do it! Learning techniques of relaxation if you know you have a tendency to get overstressed can be helpful - but be fair to yourself and do this **before** you get stressed!

Healthy sleep routines are important when stressed, as sleep can often get disturbed, lowering further your resources to cope. Try not to study or worry when in, or near, your place of sleep. Associate your bed with being sleepy and wanting to sleep. If you can't fall off to sleep after a reasonable time, don't fight it, get up and go back to bed when tired. Relaxation, hot baths/showers, drinking hot milky or carbohydrate drinks and taking a break between finishing study and going to bed can all assist getting to sleep more easily.

Set aside a worry time. Set aside maybe 15 minutes a day to focus on things that worry you (work, exams, money etc). During the day keep a blank sheet of paper handy so that whenever a worry comes to mind and interferes with study or getting to sleep etc, you immediately write it down. You can deal with these during your worry time. After this, you can forget about your problems and refocus yourself. Make sure you stick to your worry time. Take out your sheet of paper and let your mind worry as much as it wants about each of your concerns. After a few minutes do some problem solving.

Problem solve

- Write down your problem very specifically. Name the people, situation, behaviours that concern you and the feelings you have.
 - Brainstorm possible solutions, no matter how ludicrous, let your mind go and write these down.
 - Don't judge your ideas at this point- just let go.
 - Exclude the impossible or bizarre solutions.
 - With the remaining solutions write down the pro's and cons of each ie. What would the results of this particular option be. How would you feel about those results?
 - Choose the option you would feel most comfortable with at this moment in time.
 - Now you have a choice about whether you enact that solution. You can choose when to change. You don't have to make changes if you don't want to. Often it's not a question of whether you want to make a change, but the best time and the best way to do so.
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